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Behind the Wheel, About to Snap

March 9, 2010 in [Photo](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

. . . A photo, that is. Below, Peter Hessler shares some of the photographs he took while traveling across China doing research for his latest book, [Country Driving: A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory](#). Read our review of *Country Driving* [here](#); for other takes on the book, check out [Jonathan Yardley's review](#) at the Washington Post, and Adam Daniel Mezei's write-up at his [blog](#).

By Peter Hessler

Back in 2000, when I was starting out as a freelance writer in China, I went to Hong Kong and spent \$800 US on a film camera with a high-quality lens. I was writing newspaper stories, and editors often asked for illustrations; I figured I would shoot my own photos. I did it for a few pieces, but soon I realized why you almost never see somebody doing both high-quality writing and photography. The skills are completely different, and so is the relationship to a subject. I had never thought about everything that goes into building trust during an interview — direct eye contact, close physical proximity, small talk, sharing a meal or a cup of tea. The rhythm and tone of these interactions changed completely when I backed off and put an instrument up to my face; the interruption was so abrupt it almost felt like a violation. I'm sure that a photographer would have a similar sensation if he had to stop a shoot in order to conduct a long sit-down interview. Each form of documentary depends on its own intimacy, focus, and attention, and they don't mix well.

In the end, I shifted to magazines, where professionals always provided the illustrations. I put the \$800 camera in a drawer and never used it again. But around the same time, digital cameras started to improve, and I bought one before making the second half of my driving trip across northern China. I hoped to travel all the way to the Tibetan Plateau, following small roads that paralleled sections of Great Wall. The camera was simple, about \$150, and since there was no film involved I spent even less time thinking about photos. If something interested me, I pulled over and took a snapshot. I did it strictly for reference, and I didn't worry about quality. I liked odd scenes, especially the safety propaganda that was sprouting along new Chinese roads.



In my book, *Country Driving*, I refer to these as “Carsicles” — “some gruesome version of a children’s treat.” That one is painted with drops of blood, and the message says “Cherish Life, Drive Safely.” Others were even less subtle, like the Carsicle whose wrecked body had been painted with the message “Four People Died.”



All told, I drove more than seven thousand miles across northern China, and I saw plenty of safety propaganda, but virtually no cops. The automobile routine was still so new to the country that it didn’t yet have a functioning highway patrol; sometimes I found myself thinking: Whatever happened to the police state? It’s a sensation I often had in China, where life can feel surprisingly chaotic and unsupervised. In Inner Mongolia, I never saw a live cop, but they had erected roadside statues instead.



These guys even had ID numbers on their uniforms. Back in the States, two of my sisters are married to cops, and I liked to send them pictures of their Chinese counterparts. My favorite was posted in the Ordos Desert, just north of the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan. I wondered how Genghis would have responded if he had encountered guards like this during his march across Central Asia. Probably similar to folks in my part of Colorado, where people like to shoot things from trucks.



After the trip, when I reviewed my photos, I realized that the quality was better than anything I had done while trying to work for newspapers. With a digital camera, I couldn't screw up the light settings, and shots tended to be looser and more instinctive. I took pictures without thinking, and they were so quick that they didn't interrupt my reporting routine. And yet occasionally they were good enough for publication. The first photo of the Carsicle eventually ran as an illustration in the *New Yorker*, and the last terracotta cop became the cover photo for my book. I chose it for the humor and the symbolic value — one of the themes of *Country Driving* is the odd lack of visible authority in many parts of this authoritarian nation. When I showed the cover to a friend who used to make her living as a photographer, she said, "That's why I don't work as a photographer anymore. It's too easy now for people like you."

From my perspective, the digital camera is most significant in how it's changed the way I organize and use my notes. Digital voice recorders have never played the same role — it might be great in other places and other situations, but recording an interview in China makes people nervous. I learned that they're far more comfortable if I'm taking handwritten notes, so that's what I've always done.

But a digital camera is quick, unobtrusive, and easy to keep in a pocket. It's great for signs and notices — infinitely faster than my terrible Chinese handwriting. Sometimes a picture captures a key moment, and later, when I'm ready to write about the scene, I'll put the image alongside my notes. At one point in my road trip, I was searching for a section of the Great Wall near a remote village called Temple of Peace, and an old man told me to take his grandson as a guide. The boy was twelve years old, and he jumped into the car; five other kids immediately joined him. The grandfather said nothing — he was perfectly happy to let me drive off with what was obviously a high percentage of the children in Temple of Peace.

That was one of many moments when I understood how trusting people are in rural China. And later, when I looked at the photo I took from the driver's seat, I recalled the silence that settled in the car when the kids suddenly realized that they were on the road with a *laowai*:



When it came time to describe that scene in my book, I stared at the photo for a while and then wrote:

In the front seat there was a boy and a girl, and three more boys sat in the back. The oldest boy was twelve and in his lap he carried a two-year-old girl. All six were extremely serious, especially the baby — a look of worry creased her pudgy face. It occurred to me that this was a situation for chocolate. I divided and distributed three Dove bars, and then we headed off for the Great Wall. I felt like the Pied Piper — for all I knew, these kids represented the entire future of Temple of Peace.

Here in the southern Ordos, the elevation was nearly five thousand feet, and hills of sand had crept to the very edge of town. The Great Wall ran through the dunes, ten feet tall and made of tamped earth. "You could walk along it for a year and still not reach Beijing!" one of the boys announced as he jumped out of the City Special. The children scampered across a dune and I followed, great sheets of sand sliding away beneath our feet. . . .



When you're on the road, it's often hard to take detailed notes that describe the landscape. This is easier on foot — many years ago, I trekked for two months across the Swiss Alps, sleeping in a tent and avoiding any motorized transport. I wrote essays and stories about my journey, and it taught me a great deal about how to describe a landscape. For one thing, it takes time — you have to stare at a natural scene for a while before you can figure out how to put it on the page. But time isn't a problem on foot, where the travel is so exhausting that periodically you have to rest. In Switzerland, I'd stop at good viewpoints, and I'd try to write about the scene before me.

In a car, though, the pacing is different. When I stopped in northern China, it was usually to ask directions or talk to somebody, and I couldn't pull over and write at length each time the landscape became interesting. At night I was often too sleepy to work on my descriptions. But the digital camera proved to be an enormous help. If a scene opened up before me, or if the light changed in some spectacular way, I'd take a quick snapshot.

In northern and western China, the skies often impressed me most. I'd see a storm sweep across Inner Mongolia, or I'd watch the twilight sky shift colors above Qinghai Lake.



In the evenings I usually camped, pulling off on side roads and pitching my tent.



Near the end of my journey, I camped beside the ruins of Hecangcheng, a Han dynasty fortified granary that was still impressive after more than two thousand years. It was perhaps the most isolated and beautiful campsite of the journey; I didn't see another soul. The afternoon sky was luminescent —



I often gazed at these photos while writing the book, because they contained a depth that was often lacking in my notes. The pictures recalled the journey's beauty, and they reminded me to direct some

of my attention upward, to that spectacular sky. Near the end of the book, I describe camping beside Hecangcheng:

In this part of the desert, on the western edge of the empire, the Chinese had constructed forts instead of a wall. The land is so flat and barren that I could see the next one in the distance, three miles away. I had reached the end of the line — the stream of continuous walls had given way to scattered forts, like final drops from a spigot that had been shut off.

There was nobody else at Hecangcheng. The government planned to build a paved road to the site, but the modern construction had yet to begin and the place remained isolated. . . . I pitched my tent in the shadow of the fort. A small stream ran in the distance, surrounded by marshland, like a thin ribbon of green tied taut across this parched landscape. The sky was restless — fugitive clouds scattering across a dome of blue. At midnight the gusting wind shook me awake. It hummed across the Gobi, and whistled through the ruins, and I lay there listening to the same song that stirred soldiers in the days of the Han.

So why not include photos in the book? People often ask me this, and some readers are disappointed that there aren't any pictures of the people and places that I'm describing. For me, quality is the main issue. I don't like how photos get reproduced on glossy pages in the middle of a book, sandwiched between two seas of text; the pictures are piled together and inevitably the colors have dulled. And my photography is too poor and haphazard to do justice to the story. Some of the better pictures happen to be of minor characters or secondary scenes; often I don't have a single decent shot of my main subject. That's one key difference with a professional — a real photographer gets the shot that matters. I get the shot that happens to be in front of me.

And I want the reader to imagine people and scenes strictly from the text. So much of our input nowadays involves mixed media, and there's something pure about staying focused on words for the 424 pages of a book. I understand how photographers feel the same way about images. When my friend Mark Leong published *China Obscura*, a volume of photographs from his years working in China, he decided not to include subtitles alongside the pictures. He wanted the images to be taken on their own terms.

For me, the digital camera remains primarily a note-taking tool. In particular, it's part of the intermediary process between notes and writing, the crucial transition that takes you from rough observations to finished text. And my notebooks can be very rough — I have terrible handwriting, and often I'm working in dirty or sweaty conditions. This is one reason why I transcribe my notes into my computer as quickly as possible. It's boring and time-consuming, but over the years I've learned how important this is. For one thing, while I'm typing out notes, I tend to remember other details — something hanging on a wall in a room, or the expression on a person's face. The closer the transcription is to the interview, the more details I can recall. I add these memories to my transcription, and later they might be the touches that help bring life to a scene.

At one point in *Country Driving*, I describe picking up a hitchhiker named Zhen. He was a strange guy who liked wandering in the Tengger Desert; he wouldn't give me his full name. For part of the time we were together, I sat in the passenger's seat, which gave me a chance to jot things down in detail. Nevertheless, my handwritten notes contain mostly quotes from our conversation, and there are only the barest physical descriptions. I describe Zhen's clothing, which is always the easiest thing to observe about a person. It's also generally the least useful for a writer. To bring somebody to life you need more than a set of clothes, but it can be hard to capture those subtle details right there, in the moment, when you're struggling to write down everything he's saying.

After dropping Zhen off, I camped for the night, and it wasn't until two days later that I was able to type my notes into the computer. But that's soon enough; the scene was still vivid in my mind. While transcribing, I remembered the way Zhen talked, and I realized there was something distinctive about it — he spoke quickly and somewhat erratically. In my transcription I note that he had a "strange, spasmodic way of speaking." One of the few physical details in my notebook is that Zhen wore a

mustache. Like a lot of Chinese facial hair, it was a work in progress, and during the transcription I added a detail that the mustache was “thin and crooked.” The crookedness probably had more to do with the way Zhen held his mouth while talking, but the mustache was the part of his face that captured this gesture.

I had taken a snapshot of Zhen when I dropped him off. Like most photos from the road, it was low quality. But years later, when I was working on the book and began to write that scene, I looked at the picture again:



Like I said, not a great photo. I wouldn't want it used as an illustration. But it played a crucial role during the stage when I was processing my notes. Studying the transcribed text, I saw that I had interesting quotes from Zhen, and also saw the comments about his “spasmodic” speaking rhythms and the “crooked” mustache. The photograph made me think more about this off-kilter quality — it's reflected in his posture, in his mustache, in the way he wore his cap. He's not straight; he's out of place. The photo also reminded me of the absolute desolation of the landscape we were driving through. I thought about all of these elements while writing the scene:

I saw a solitary figure walking beside the road. I pulled over and called out: “Where are you going?”

“Where are you going?” the man said.

Both questions were moot: this road had no turnoffs for forty miles. I asked if he wanted a ride, and he shrugged and got in. He was twenty-five years old, with a thin crooked mustache that crossed his lip like a calligrapher's mistake. He was dressed neatly, in a blue button-down shirt, and he said he lived in Yinchuan, the provincial capital. I asked if he had had some kind of trouble on the road.

“No,” he said. “I come here every month, just to walk. There are three daily buses that follow this road. Nine thirty, twelve thirty, and two thirty. The early one drops me off and then I walk for a while. I usually catch one of the other two back to Yinchuan.”

He had a strange, spasmodic way of speaking — words piled fast in jerky sentences, like he was trying to fill all the space that surrounded us. He wouldn't tell me his full name; all he said was that his family name was Zhen. But he answered at length when I asked why he came to the Tengger Desert.

"I used to be in the military," Zhen said. "I was a soldier in the 1990s, and I was stationed in Shaanxi, in the Qinling Mountains. Every day we were in the wilderness, and now sometimes I miss it. I don't know exactly how to say it, but that was a very happy time. It was difficult, of course, but there was honor and pride to the job. And it didn't have anything to do with me — everything was about the squadron. The group was more important than the person. That's what I really liked about it. . . ."

The scene continues; Zhen describes his desire to stay close to his friends, and how he plans to never marry, because it might destroy his friendships. Finally, at the end, I let him drive my Jeep for a while.

It's an encounter that I hope captures some of the strangeness of travelling alone through remote China. But as far as the actual writing goes, that scene came into focus over time, in distinct stages. It wasn't entirely contained in either the handwritten notes or the snapshot. The transcription process helped me remember other details, and then, when I started writing, I studied the photo until certain elements — the mustache, the way Zhen spoke — acquired a coherent imagery. The mustache becomes "a calligrapher's mistake"; Zhen speaks fast, as if trying to fill the empty desert with words. These images connect to writing, to language, to storytelling — to two misfits having a conversation in a Jeep Cherokee in the middle of nowhere.

If I had written that scene five minutes after it occurred, it wouldn't have had the same depth. It would have been technically accurate but emotionally incomplete. I had the details and I had the photo, but I needed time to process them and create a coherent sense of mood. In the end, I wrote the final version six years after I met Zhen. I guess this is one of many reasons why I don't use Twitter. Sometimes, like the Chinese cops say, you just have to slow down.



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